

# THE AGNELLIS UNLEASHED

From her Manhattan vantage point, Gianni Agnelli's niece Priscilla Rattazzi observes her family's messy and expensive feud with the same affectionate eye evident in her photography.

**Christopher Silvester**

meets the artist of the Agnellis

Portrait by **Victoria Birkinshaw**

**A**t first one thinks it's a love affair between the two dogs; in effect it's more like my love affair with them, though they did like each other in the end. They did. But it took a while.' Priscilla Rattazzi, the New York-based photographer, is discussing her new book, *Luna & Lola*, a memoir in black and white pictures of her two pets, which is to be launched next week at the Belgravia pet shop Mungo & Maud. The youngest of six, Priscilla grew up in Rome as a member of the Agnelli family and is therefore an expert on complex familial relations. 'I think it's not bad to be the youngest of six,' she says. 'You have lots of protectors. It's good to be the baby. I'm very close to my brother Lupo, who's just three years older than me. We text and email many, many, many times a day. My older siblings never lived in America, but Lupo lived there for ten years. He went to university there and stayed on for a while.'

Priscilla is the daughter of Susanna Agnelli and Count Urbano Rattazzi. Her mother's brother was Gianni Agnelli, who ran Fiat until 1996 and was the head of the clan until his death in 2003. Through Exor, the Agnelli Group investment company, the family own banks, newspapers and industrial concerns, and its investments constitute the largest percentage of the Italian stock market. It is no exaggeration to say that the Agnellis have emerged as the substitute royal family of Italy since the Second World War.

'My parents separated when I was very young and my mother went into politics when I turned 18,' says Priscilla. Starting in 1974, Susanna Agnelli was mayor of the Tuscan district of Monte Argentario for ten

**The English nanny drummed into her: 'Never forget you are an Agnelli'**

years, during which time she became an MP for the centre-left Republican Party (PRI), an MEP and, from 1983, a senator. In 1995, at the height of her career, she became the first and only woman ever to be Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

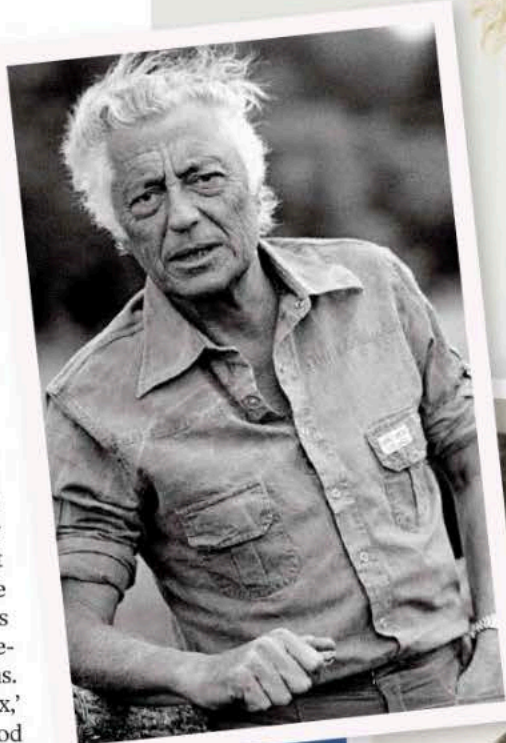
'She liked power, she liked being important; there's no question about it,' Priscilla recalls.

'She was also quite good at it. First of all, most importantly, she spoke English beautifully. Many Italian politicians cannot speak English. She was tall and good-looking. I have this great picture of her in the Oval Office with Clinton and Gore and a bunch of guys, and she's the only woman. Good for her! In Italy, at that time, there were few women

politicians. In terms of her style she was known for her bluntness, but also for her sense of humour.'

Priscilla's great-grandfather on her father's side, also Urbano Rattazzi, was a senator from a Piedmontese family who held high office in various governments. 'I didn't grow up with my father so it's a part of my history that I've neglected,' she says casually. Indeed, she always felt that she belonged more to her maternal family. Her mother had one pre-eminent lesson drummed into her as a child by her English nanny: 'Never forget you are an Agnelli.' In 1975, Susanna, who was the third of seven siblings and the closest in age to Gianni, wrote a memoir, *We Always Wore Sailor Suits*, about growing up as an Agnelli in pre-war Italy.

Priscilla first became aware of the burden of



Above: Gianni Agnelli by Priscilla Rattazzi, 1978. Right, clockwise from top left: Gianni with his brother Giorgio and sisters Maria Sole, Cristiana, Clara and Susanna (Priscilla's mother), Forte dei Marmi, 1933



Priscilla Rattazzi in London, September 2010



Luna (left) and Lola on Georgica Beach, East Hampton, 2009; Priscilla's parents Count Urbano Rattazzi and Susanna Agnelli, Forte dei Marmi, 1964



belonging to the clan as a teenager in the 1970s, when wealthy Italian families faced the threat of kidnap by revolutionary terrorist groups such as the Red Brigades, which kidnapped and murdered Italian prime minister Aldo Moro in 1978. 'That's why I moved to New York. We all moved,' says Priscilla. Susanna Agnelli took her two youngest children to live in Manhattan in 1971. 'My mother kept saying, "We've got to get out of Italy, we've got to get out of Italy." So the younger ones did. My older sisters were already married and had children, so they couldn't leave, but they were careful. My mother had a bodyguard when she was in Italy. I went to boarding school in France and then to boarding school in Wales, Atlantic College, and finally I went to college in the US.'

School holidays, too, were taken abroad. 'My uncle [Gianni]'s daughter Margherita is my age, and his son Edoardo was very close to my brother Lupo. So it was always the four of us. We were always together. We would go on vacation with them. It was very glamorous - that's when I became aware of this glamour factor. We were 14 years old and my aunt had rented this fabulous house in Mallorca that belonged to a wealthy Spanish family. Truman Capote was one of the guests. He had this very distinctive voice, and my cousin [Margherita] and I would impersonate him. He would be holding forth outside and we would hide in the bushes and make fun of him. We were insufferable teenagers. When we were 15, my aunt Marella rented this fabulous seaside house in Mexico over Christmas, just south of Acapulco. It was my first time on a private jet. That's when it hit me. It was always like that: private planes, glamorous venues. My brother and I were not like that, but with them [Gianni's family] it was always the stratosphere. I liked to joke that we were the poor cousins. He [Gianni] was the defining uncle because he and my mother were so close. He was incredibly charismatic, funny and

quite cynical. He was the king of the family, there's no question about it. He liked me, for sure, but he liked his nephews much more, because he was just that kind of guy.'

Long before Gianni's son Edoardo, who was something of a mystic and a self-styled ascetic, committed suicide by driving his sports car off a viaduct, he had already been deemed unfit to lead the family business, so the Fiat succession passed from Gianni to his grandson John Elkann, known as Jaki. 'History repeated itself,' says Priscilla. 'Gianni did with his grandson what his grandfather did with him. It has to do with control of the family business. In that sense it was very much like a kingdom, but Gianni did it to maintain family control of the company. It's very Italian, this belief that family companies need to stay within the family.'

For the last couple of years, Priscilla's cousin and childhood companion Margherita has been at war in the Italian courts with her son John Elkann. She blew the whistle on the family to the Italian tax authorities, claiming that Gianni hid assets worth more than £1 billion offshore in the form of bank accounts, moorings on the French Riviera, property in Paris and New York, shares and works of art. Margherita, whose mother and other son sided with John Elkann against her, believed that the family had conspired with their advisers to deprive her of her full inheritance. 'Someone took my sons hostage,' Margherita has claimed. 'Were I not morally strong, I would have jumped off a bridge as my brother did.'

From her semi-detached vantage point in New York, Priscilla looks upon her cousin's litigation with dismay. 'We've all watched it for almost three years. We're all very upset about it. I think it shouldn't be public. There's always two sides to a story. I think everyone's wrong and everyone's right.' She says that Margherita's action has been an own goal, because it caused her to pay a huge fine to the Italian tax authorities. 'It was not a good move on her part,' she says. 'I just wish, frankly, that it had been resolved in private. It has

**'Were I not morally strong, I would have jumped off a bridge as my brother did'**

**Margherita Agnelli**

been resolved to a degree, but not entirely.' Nonetheless, Priscilla still talks to both sides of the family: 'I don't believe in drawing lines in the sand; I think it's a big mistake. But being in America gives me a different perspective. In Italy, people are definitely not taking my cousin's side, but I'm maybe a little more forgiving.'

Priscilla studied photography at Sarah Lawrence College in America, then worked in New York as an apprentice to the Japanese fashion photographer Hiro. 'I wanted to be an artist but I couldn't paint. But I absolutely knew that I had an eye. I won a photography prize when I was in boarding school and won a prize when I was in university. It was not a big deal, just something that kept me thinking I could do this.' Along with Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, Hiro was one of several photographers who redefined fashion photography in the 1960s. He was shooting all the advertising for designers such as Halston and Hanae Mori, and it was the beginning of the supermodel generation. 'All these beautiful women came to the studio every day with their make-up artists, Christie Brinkley, Iman... I was completely starstruck.'

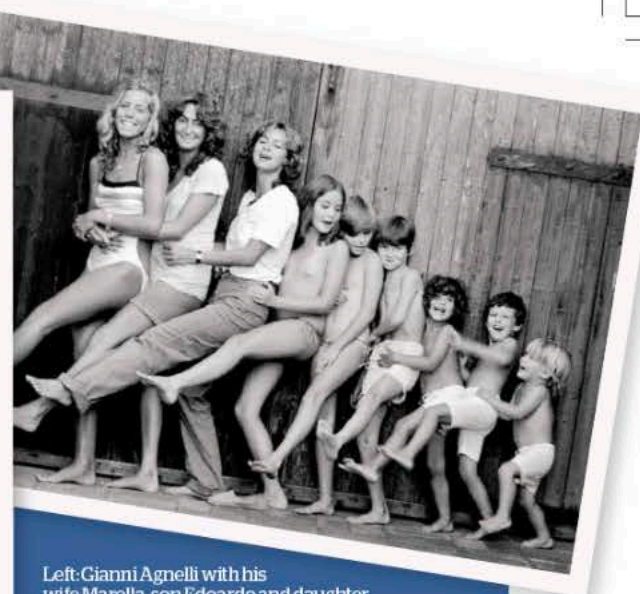
After a year, Priscilla became a fashion photographer in her own right, working for various American magazines as well as for *Vogue Italia*. And soon after that she married her first husband, Alex, son of the Italian film producer Carlo Ponti (who produced *Doctor Zhivago*) and stepson of Sophia Loren. 'We met through my brother in New York in the late Seventies. Alex and I went out for about a year. I was too young when I got married, at 23. Also, I think that I wasn't made to have an Italian husband. I prefer Anglo-Saxon behaviour, the whole faithful thing. I found out through reading the *New York Post* that he was cheating on me and I thought, "I don't think I can really stomach this one for the long term." Does she think Italian men are predestined to be unfaithful? 'Probably... probably,' she answers.

After about five years she got married for a second time, to Claus Moehlmann, a German investment banker working on Wall Street, and had a son, Maxi. At the same time, she grew tired of being a fashion photographer. 'It

was no longer of any interest to me at all,' she says. 'After I became a mother I pulled back. I didn't work much at all. But I hated not working.' She watched the toll that Wall Street took on Claus. 'The pressure of that world was brutal. He always wanted to move back to Europe where the pace would be a little bit calmer.' In 1988 she published *Best Friends*, a book of photographs of friends, many of them celebrities, with their dogs. Glenn Close was on the cover, her uncle Gianni wrote the introduction and Priscilla was featured on the People page of *Time* magazine, which impressed her mother.

**H**er second marriage collapsed in the late 1980s, because Claus wanted to return to Europe and she did not, and shortly afterwards she met Chris Whittle, her current husband, an education entrepreneur who founded Edison Schools, a commercial company that manages US public (ie, state-funded) schools. 'Never did I think that I was going to become an American citizen and stay in New York, but I did. We've been married 20 years.' With him, she has two daughters, Andrea and Sasha, and the family settled in Carnegie Hill, on Manhattan's Upper East Side ('because I wanted my kids to be able to walk to school'). They also have a house in the Hamptons at Georgica Pond, the 290-acre coastal lagoon that counts Steven Spielberg, Martha Stewart and Calvin Klein among its lakeshore residents. 'It's my equivalent of the Greek place where Italians go to holiday,' she explains. 'The family spend as much time there as possible and it is where Luna and Lola had their happiest times. 'Luna chased birds along the pond,' Priscilla writes in the book, 'while Lola dug rabbit holes.' Now her son Maxi, 24, is working as a private-equity analyst, Andrea, 19, is at university, and Sasha, 15, is at high school. 'She's spending a semester in the Bahamas, so it's the first time in 21 years that I don't have anyone at home. It's strange.'

Priscilla has dedicated *Luna & Lola* to her mother, who died last year, aged 87. 'She fell, broke her hip, spent six weeks in intensive care, then her heart stopped. On a certain level I think her time had come then and there when she fell. I just wish she hadn't spent the six weeks in the hospital. I wish she could have died at home. In my dedication I thanked her for teaching me to appreciate irony. She was very ironic. That's something that prevails in my family. My uncle had a tremendous sense of humour. He was always teasing, joking, teasing, joking. My mother was the same. When I was going through a divorce for the second time and getting married the third time, my



Left: Gianni Agnelli with his wife Marella, son Edoardo and daughter Margherita, Villa Bona, 1968. Above: Priscilla's sisters, nieces and nephews (from left) Sonia, Ilaria and Delfina Rattazzi, Marella and Martina Zampoli, Pietro Sermonti, Alexia Rattazzi, Anna Sermonti and Urbano Rattazzi, Porto Santo Stefano, 1979

'Gianni had a tremendous sense of humour, he would say, "What is your civil status? I'm so confused. Are you married or divorced or single?"'

uncle would say, "What is your civil status? I'm so confused. Are you married or divorced or single?" It's unheard of for an Italian woman to be married three times. Now I like to joke that if you're married three times you're part of a very exclusive club. Even in America. Three is the acceptable number. More than three and you're Elizabeth Taylor. It can't be taken seriously.' Indeed, Priscilla's sisters and cousins refer to her as 'Barbara Hutton', after the much-married US heiress to the Woolworth fortune.

Priscilla, though, is more interested in discussing her dogs' complex relationships than her own. Her book captures Luna and Lola's essence as an odd couple. Luna, a golden retriever, arrived in 1997, and Lola, a miniature dachshund, joined the family in 2004. Over six years together, until Luna's death from cancer last year, they bonded. Luna was regal, Lola playful, constantly trying to bite Luna's tail. 'It

was just like siblings, hate at first sight until they became friends. They were so different and so funny together. Now I have a new dog, Leo, and, of course, she [Lola] hates him. I call him the spiritual son of Luna, because he's the same breed. When Luna died, Lola didn't want to go into the room where she had been put down, because with dogs it's all about smells. The next morning I had to take Lola to the park and she didn't want to go. Luna had been her protector and even her mother on some level. I know Lola misses her terribly, because she doesn't want to walk any more. I still make her walk, I drag her. But she's very fearful of other dogs, she's more neurotic than ever. Dachshunds are very neurotic.'

There will not be a Leo and Lola book. 'You can only do one dog book,' Priscilla insists. But there will be Leo updates on her blog. While she was in London, her new golden retriever and Lola were not getting along. 'Lola was really a witch. I was so beside myself. Somebody recommended a dog trainer. She came to help me for a couple of hours and I liked her so much that she said, "Let me take your dogs for a week and by the time you get back your dogs will have bonded." Every night she sent me an email saying, "Your dogs are doing great." Already the puppy has overtaken Lola in size. 'The puppy is a boy, which is another dynamic. I thought if I got another female, Lola would always be comparing her to Luna, and that would be unhealthy.'

Her uncle Gianni was a dog lover, as well as her father and her aunts Cristiana Brandolini and Maria Sole Teodorani and especially Allegra Agnelli (the widow of her uncle Umberto). 'My mother was not a dog lover,' Priscilla admits. 'But we had dogs growing up until my parents got divorced. My uncle loved huskies, my father loves retrievers and Irish setters, my aunt Cristiana has dachshunds and my aunt Allegra rescues stray dogs from shelters. Dogs are a very important component of life, I think. Dogs really add a whole comic layer to life.'

*Luna & Lola* (Callaway Arts & Entertainment, £25) is available at Mungo & Maud, 79 Elizabeth Street, SW1 (020 7022 1208)



Priscilla with her son Maxi, East Hampton, 2005